

White House Conference on Aging – Solutions Forum

March 12, 2005

Presented by Brent Green, author of Marketing to Leading-Edge Baby Boomers and member of the American Society on Aging, Business Forum on Aging, Leadership Council

“I hate the Baby Boomers. They're the most self-centered, self-seeking, self-interested, self-absorbed, self-indulgent, self-aggrandizing generation in American history. As they enter late middle age, the Boomers still can't grow up. Guys who once dropped acid are now downing Viagra; women who once eschewed lipstick are now getting liposuction.” — Paul Begala, in an April 2000 Esquire Magazine essay entitled “The Worst Generation”

Boomers are waking up to the reality that they are the aging population to which many negative images now apply.

This came home to me upon discovering a multi-page harangue against Boomers in a June 2000 TIME magazine article entitled *Twilight of the Boomers*. Written by the current ombudsman for the *New York Times*, here are representative quotes:

TIME MAGAZINE – JUNE 12, 2000

“The Baby Boom was a self-absorbed generation ... that defined itself not through sacrifice as its parents had, but through indulgence.” — Ralph Whitehead, Professor, University of Massachusetts

“Long-awaited Baby boomer die-off to begin soon, experts say. The ravages of age will take its toll on Boomer self-indulgence, and the curtain will at long last fall on what is regarded by many as the most odious generation America has ever produced.”— The Onion, as quoted in TIME

When I started noticing, I didn't have difficulty finding other sources of Boomer derision in media:

JOE QUEENAN – author of *Balsamic Dreams: a Short but Self-Important History of the Baby Boomer Generation*

“They’re self-centered, rude, and obnoxious beyond belief, and they’re everywhere. Until the rise of the Baby Boomers, America only had to deal with a few thousand geographically spaced people who acted like pigs. Now it has millions of them. This is the downside of prosperity.”

AARP THE MAGAZINE AND BOOMER STUDY

At the AARP National Convention in Las Vegas last October, organizers distributed a study prior to the 2011 Council meeting, entitled *“A Changing Political Landscape: As One Generation Replaces Another.”*

This study sampled 603 boomers, 600 silents, and 601 GIs. A sample size of 603 does not adequately represent 78 million Boomers. According to the chairman of the Department of Psychology at the University of Colorado, AARP researchers failed to adequately represent many critical Boomer segments such as Hispanics. Nevertheless, the study reaches sweeping, negative conclusions:

“Our findings indicate that boomers have a greater belief in government entitlements and a lesser belief in personal obligations than the GI Generation. Boomers are more likely to feel the government owes them something and less likely to believe they owe the country certain obligations, such as military service and paying taxes.”

Aspects of this study and negative Boomer stereotypes also appeared in the September / October 2004 issue of *AARP: the Magazine*.

TIME MAGAZINE – JOE KLEIN

What does all this negativity have to do with the White House? After President George Bush’s inaugural address in January, Joe Klein, TIME columnist and CNN pundit,

wrote an essay assessing the speech, entitled *“Playing with Fire.”* Here are a couple of Klein’s conclusions:

“But ours is also a generation that has self-indulgently perverted (Martin Luther) King’s call to freedom into a defense of excess, of freedom from responsibility.”

“Bush, in the end, is a classic baby boomer. His was a speech that could only have been delivered by a member of our exorbitantly messianic generation.”

NEWSPAPERS

Newspapers across the nation often lead Boomer-critical columns and articles with less-than-generous headlines:

“As they head into the sunset, nation’s boomers are a bust”

The Seattle Times – 9/28/04

“Ravenous baby boomers set to devour health care dollars”

Booth Newspapers – 9/22/04

Stereotypes also lurk in marketing. My book assesses negative stereotypes in recent high-profile advertising campaigns created by a global electronics manufacturing company and a global pharmaceutical company.

Therefore, I propose two recommendations:

- Formation of a national organization that studies generational antipathy and identifies stereotypical and denigrating images in advertising and media communications, with focus on Boomers, but not limited to this generation
- Eventual federal funding in the form of grants for selected nonprofit organizations that successfully promote positive images of aging generations and promote intergenerational harmony

Why should these initiatives be a White House mission? As a leading-edge Boomer, I remember two presidents who tackled social injustice of a different type. I'm referring to John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson who helped eliminate institutionalized segregation in America. The social challenges for this administration are ageism and generational antipathy.

Finally, I'll leave you with a closing thought. There is no "Greatest Generation," because such a notion leads to the opposite conclusion: "The Worst Generation." This great nation represents the achievements of 15 great generations. We need this idea to become part of the fabric of society.